Can Gas Transform Mauritania?

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The western Sahel state of Mauritania features on both the United Nations list of Least Developed Countries and the US-based Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index. Yet it is both more stable than several of its Sahel peers and appears to have considerable development prospects on account of its recently discovered hydrocarbon resources.

The question is whether Mauritania is going to be able to manage its gas potential in ways that enhance development prospects for the 4.9 million people who live in the arid and sparsely populated country. There are many challenges ahead.

Mauritania discovered its first large natural gas field, the Grande Tortue Ahmeyim, on the maritime border with Senegal, in 2015. A second, even larger gas field, wholly within Mauritania’s territorial waters, BirAllah, was discovered in 2019. These are ultra-deep level resources, nearly three-thousand meters underwater and 120kms offshore.

The Grande Tortue Ahmeyim field has been rapidly developed. Mauritania and Senegal signed an agreement to share the resource on a 50-50 basis in 2018, the same year main operator bp took a final investment decision. Most of the initial operation is to be offshore with bp (lower case is now bp’s preferred style) utilising Floating Liquified Natural Gas (FLNG) technology where purification, liquefaction and shipment all happen at sea. The FLNG Gimi arrived in the area in January 2024.

The project appears to be running about two years behind its initial schedule, mostly because of the technological complexity of the system. Bp has said that the first shipments are expected in the third quarter of this year. It is however possible that there are tensions between the international energy company and the government of Mauritania. Bp’s three-year operating contract for the BirAllah gas field was not renewed in May, after a reported disagreement on how much further exploration was needed before development work could begin.
The discovery of 25 trillion cubic feet (tcf) Grande Tortue Ahmeyim and even larger BirAllah (80 tcf) fields could not have been better timed. The former is coming on stream as Europe looks to replace Russian pipeline natural gas. While the phase 1 flow will be relatively small, the resources are the third largest in Africa, behind only Nigeria and Algeria.

The obvious benefits for Mauritania are financial. It has been estimated that the first phase of the Grande Tortue Ahmeyim project will generate USD150 million a year with much greater returns further down the line. According to UNCTAD, gas investments account for 94 percent of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the country. FDI soared from a low of USD271 million in 2016 to USD1 402 in 2022. The only prominent industries in the country before the gas discoveries were iron ore mining (mostly since 2006) and fishing, which has in recent years accounted for between 35 and 50 percent of Mauritania’s exports.

But this boon is landing in a country which is divided and fragile. Mauritania has been described as the ’link’ between the Sahel and West Africa. But it is probably more appropriate to suggest that the country fills a gap on the map than that it provides a conduit for trade or communications. Almost all economic activity happens along the Atlantic coastline which is also where most of the population lives.

So arid and hostile is most of the country that 57 percent of the population lives in the main cities, an extremely high figure for a Least Development Country. Only about five percent of land is arable, almost all of it along the Senegalese border. The rest is mostly Saharan desert and is famously lawless, with nomadism and smuggling the common way of life in the sparsely populated interior, especially on the eastern border with Mali. Links with neighbouring countries are vestigial at best and what little business Mauritania has done with the outside world, prior to the discovery of gas, has been conducted across the ocean, not its land borders.

However, in some respects Mauritania stands out as more stable, in recent years, than some of its neighbours. The country had a long tradition of military interventions in politics but in 2019, for the first time since independence in 1960, power was successfully transferred through the ballot box. Freedom House described the poll as ‘relatively credible’. Although Mauritania is an Islamic republic, with restrictions on freedoms of expression and association, a more liberal approach has prevailed in recent years. A report published by the Carnegie Endowment in 2022, suggested that ‘over the past decade, Mauritania has made progress on the security and political stability fronts’.
Nevertheless, social divisions run deep and socio-economic exclusion is a concern. The country is reported to be ‘a highly stratified and ethnically segregated society’. It is comprised of three groups: The Beydan, who are descended from the traditional ruling caste in the Maghreb and dominate government (30 percent of population); the Haratine, former slaves who in many respects are said to remain subordinated (45 percent); and the Afro-Mauritanians (25 percent) who originate in the southern part of the country.

There are tensions between and within these groups. Mauritania was the last country in the world to abolish slavery (in 1981) and the practice has only been criminalised since 2007. But it is the Afro-Mauritanians who are least assimilated. A border conflict with Senegal erupted in the early 1980s when Mauritania’s then military government attempted to expel members of these communities across the Senegal River.

It is this third group who appear to be most negatively impacted by the development of the gas industry. A large proportion of Afro-Mauritanians live semi-subsistence lives in the south of the country. But this is precisely where infrastructure to support gas development is concentrated. A massive joint military and commercial port is under construction at the town of N’Diago at the mouth of the Senegal River. As always, the project has contradictory impacts – jobs and incomes but also community displacement as well as pollution.

The discovery and exploitation of gas reserves has enabled the Mauritanian government to press on with the sort of development characteristic of petrostates. But it is only starting the journey and much will depend on its ability to manage its socio-economic base.
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